

Remaining a Light Force
EWS Contemporary Issue Paper
Submitted by Captain S. L. Gosnell
To
Major G. A. Thiele, CG 2
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The Marine Corps must embrace the light infantry concept in order to remain relevant on the modern battlefield. The light infantry unit requires less equipment and less logistics support but greater training. However, current Marine infantry units have moved more toward the conventional infantry mindset in terms of the current equipment sets and the tactics that they have adopted. The projection and sustainment of this equipment requires significant logistical support. In doing so, however, the Marine Corps has become a slave to the military industrial complex, and will lose its autonomy as a global force in readiness.

Background

The organization of light infantry units' center on individual riflemen. The original intent of light infantry was to delay or disrupt the approach of enemy conventional infantry formations. Light infantry units were dispersed, yet mutually supporting. These units would attack gaps in enemy formations. When engaged, light infantry units would then withdraw to the relative safety of their friendly ranks. Light infantry units were designed to be mobile, easily dispersible, highly lethal,

and tactically superior to their conventional infantry counterparts.¹

Consequently, light infantry forces must be capable of rapid deployment, and rapid combat power build up in any theater of operations. Modern light infantry forces must be light enough to be transported by air, possess or control the firepower necessary to accomplish the mission, have sufficient mobility to move and maneuver effectively after arrival, survive against assaults by heavier enemy forces, and be able to support themselves logistically.²

The light infantry concept focuses on the skills of the individual. The light infantryman is the decisive weapon, and technology is seen as supplemental to the light infantryman's skills, not as a crutch or replacement for his field-craft. The technological upgrades to a light infantry force focus on increasing the lethality of light infantry weapons, lightening the load of the light infantryman, improving his logistical support, and enhancing the mobility of the light infantry unit.

Instead, Marine Corps equipment has become heavier. The issue is not whether the Marine Corps can own tanks and still

¹ John Matsumura et al., *Lightning Over Water; Sharpening America's Light Forces for Rapid Reaction Missions*, Arlington, VA, RAND National Defense Research Institute, P. 165

² John Matsumura et al., *Lightning Over Water; Sharpening America's Light Forces for Rapid Reaction Missions*, Arlington, VA, RAND National Defense Research Institute, P. 169

call itself light infantry, but weather the infantry can maintain its agility while supporting the logistical requirements necessary to sustain a force laden with rolling stock and firepower. The modern battlefield is fluid, and cumbersome units reduce the ability of a force to maneuver effectively and to engage enemy elements decisively.

Current Infantry Status

One area in which the Marine Corps has added additional weight is in logistics. Over the last several years, the Marine Corps has purchased the medium truck vehicle replacement (MTVR). The Marines required the MTVR because the 5-ton fleet was old and incapable of safe and reliable transit; however, the underlying reason lies with the need to move equipment around the battlefield. The MTVR is the prime mover for several systems and items that range from artillery pieces to command operations centers (COC). The MTVR also transports large quantities of food, petroleum, replacement parts, and broken down equipment (to include other broken MTVRs). Unfortunately, its large size has made it a lucrative target on the battlefield and has now given the Marine Corps the problem of up-armoring this piece of equipment to protect the Marines and equipment on the vehicle. This process adds more weight, strains the vehicle

engine and transmission, and forces the commander to choose between transporting supplies, equipment, or troops.

Additionally, the COCs' have become larger and more cumbersome, requiring more Marines to man, move, and establish them. The modern COC, the unit operations center (UOC, Capability Set IV), for the infantry battalion requires two HMMWVs to transport it (the UOC has two trailers to contain all the equipment). This equipment requires power generation, which requires fuel, oil and maintainers. The computer systems require Marines to operate and establish communication pathways and to administer the systems. The effect is that the unit cannot move lightly and quickly across the battlefield. For example, additions of Blue Force Tracker and other software suites, the Marine on the ground will be required to carry equipment to feed the common tactical picture (CTP) to his higher commander, which increases the weight he carries and requires additional logistical sustainment that further impedes progress. The technological advances should reduce the weight and extend the range of the light infantryman; instead the opposite has been the case.

Some new equipment has actually contributed directly to mobility while indirectly impeding unit agility. For example, the acquisition of the MV-22 Osprey will increase the speed and

range in which the light infantryman can be employed and sustained. However, this aircraft also requires more space and larger landing zones, which in the end can hamper the force on the ground by limiting the available zones in which the force can be inserted.

Proposed Way Ahead

Historically, light infantry units have been rapidly deployed with minimal support in the receiving area, as was evident during OPERATION DESERT SHIELD. In 1990 the 82nd Airborne was deployed to the Saudi Arabian desert to deny the Iraqi Army the ability to invade. The 82nd was at a distinct disadvantage, as the Iraqi forces would have likely overrun the 82nd during an attack. In light of this, the 82nd had to be prepared to repel an Iraqi assault long enough for significant combat power to arrive via ports and air bases. Was the 82nd the best solution for the Iraqi problem? Had the Iraqi army mounted an attack the 82nd lacked the tactical mobility to deny the Iraqis their flank. Fortunately no attack came, but the dilemma still exists. Organizing to deploy rapidly, and yet retaining a sufficient level of combat power is the issue.

The solution lies in combat skills training and heliborne capabilities. Technology should increase the lethality of light infantry weapons, lighten the load of the light infantryman,

improve logistical support to the light infantryman, and enhance the mobility of the light infantry unit.

a) Heliborne and fire support capabilities

The British experience in Malaya and Borneo between the years of 1948 to 1966 confirmed the idea that increased heliborne capabilities will most benefit light infantry forces. During the time period outlined above, the British used the new technology of the helicopter with tremendous effect.³ Rapid movement of light infantry units across the area of operations (AO) provided ground forces mobility in restricted terrain, rapid resupply, and rapid reinforcement. With today's helicopters greater lift capabilities exist, range and payloads have increased, and fire power can be quickly and accurately delivered. Moreover, infantrymen can enjoy the added benefit of a reduction of weight, allowing them to carry more small arms ammunition.

The Osprey has further enabled light infantry units to move further, faster, with some internal logistics support. The capabilities of the MV-22 must be fully developed and exploited. The Osprey can internally transport the Expeditionary Fire Support System (EFSS), providing the unit with internal indirect

³ Scott R. McMichael, *A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1987, Pp. 113-114.

fires to supplement the 81mm mortars already on an infantry battalions table of equipment.

Additional inroads must be made toward acquiring light, internally transportable fire support platforms. Reintroducing the 105mm artillery would provide the requisite support that would be needed above and beyond the support provided by the EFSS. This would enable the light infantry unit to isolate numerically superior enemy forces by increasing the speed and punch that a light infantry unit will land.

Loiter munitions also increase the shock and lethality of light infantry units. Loiter munitions must be seen as a supporting arm to the light infantry unit, contained within the greater Marine Corps arsenal, and not an independent asset that belongs to a component commander (CFLCC/CFACC/CFMCC).

b) Individual Skills

The individual skills required of the light infantryman and light infantry unit require intense training and carefully selected commanders. Light infantry skills require a bias for action, training in terrain appreciation (to include environment specific training), a focus on unconventional operations, and small unit operational focus at the battalion level and below. Further training is required on weapons systems (to include the

employment of all supporting arms), unconventional tactics, movement, camouflage, self-reliance and mental toughness.⁴

Light infantry forces must understand that they will most often be outnumbered and out gunned. With clear guidance in the form of commander's intent, a clear understanding of the enemies' centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities, the light infantry unit can achieve tactical and strategic victories with minimal expenditures of manpower and equipment. Therefore, the unit can place vital national resources at a critical time and place, when decisive action can be taken.

The light infantry units and their ability to remain expeditionary will be crucial to the future success of the United States Marine Corps. Integral to this success is their ability to be fully air mobile. The Marine Corps must remain fully employable from Naval expeditionary shipping, namely from flight decks. To retain this capability it will be required to reduce weight in the form of vehicles (HMMWVs and AAVs), yet increase the cube space (volume taken up by equipment) available for mission specific equipment. Requirements will drive MTO/E tailoring to ensure that light infantry capabilities are embarkable on flight and sea ferry, and still retain combat power that will lead to mission success.

⁴ Scott R. McMichael, *A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1987, Pp. 235-236.

Counterpoints

The Marine Corps must maintain adequate fire support to focus on its enemies at a decisive time and place. The Marine Corps has been and will be outnumbered in the majority of fights to which it will be committed to. In fact, the Marine Corps will be called on to build up adequate power and troops prior to crossing the line of departure (LD). In order to ensure that the relative combat power is tipped in its favor, the Marine Corps will require significant supporting arms to shape the enemy to pre-LD requirements. Consequently, opponents will argue, the Marine Corps cannot be an entirely light infantry force. The counter to this is that doctrine, namely MCDP-1, commits the Corps to maneuver warfare to destroy the enemy. Fires support maneuver, but maneuver can be conducted devoid of fire support to retain surprise and operational tempo.

The Marine Corps will not always be able to insert troops in the face of significant resistance. As America's rapid response force, the Marine Corps must remain light and agile; otherwise it will become an extension of the Army. The Marine Corps must be separate and distinct, capable of sustainment and maneuver. When Marines operate independently and rapidly the capability to surprise the enemy will increase exponentially. If the Corps continues down the road of an equipment laden and dependent

force, the Marine Corps will quickly be deemed obsolete and subsumed into the Army.

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